

PAUL FRKOVICH

Oral History: EDITED VERSION

Birth Date: November 4, 1925

Interview EI-1162 by Janet Levine, Ph.D. on August 17, 2000

Immigrated from Ledenice, Croatia at the age of 26. Arrived (via Italy and Argentina) in 1950

Read the oral history. Jot down answers to the questions as you go along. Then discuss the answers in your group.

First, Paul snuck **out** of his old country (the former Yugoslavia). Then he illegally snuck **into** the U.S. Your skit will focus on how he got to the U.S. and why he was almost deported.

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I'm here with Paul Frkovich, who came from Ledenice, Croatia [Leh-DEN-eet-zeh, Crow-AY-shuh] in 1951 at the age of 26.

FRKOVICH: [In Croatia] We were awfully poor people. My mother had seven kids alive. Two of them passed away at birth, and I was the oldest one. It was just labor and I mean plowing, clean the horses, feed the horses and calves and all that. There were seven of us...living in the same house. On the floor down below us we used to have a calf, and goat, and sheep... All of us were living in one room and a kitchen. And now you know why I had to go (they laugh).

I was just but 17 years old and I went to Germany as an apprentice with agreement with German government and Croatian government. [**NOTE:** Croatia was part of Yugoslavia both before and after World War II. During World War II, Croatia had its own government, which was an ally of Nazi Germany. Croatia did not regain independence until 1991.] It was better in Germany than it would be home. So I put up with it since '42 'til '45. I went to Germany for apprenticeship in connection with [an agreement between] Croatia and Germany... They were collecting people who want to go to Germany. I was just but 17 years old and I went to Germany as a machinist apprentice.

LEVINE: What did you [feel] as a seventeen-year old leaving your country for the first time?

FRKOVICH: Lonesome (he laughs sadly) and sad, but still I realized there was no living there where I come from either. It was better in Germany than it would be [at] home. So I put up with it [from] '42 'til '45. Close to three years. I learned German. And I learned how to work. I didn't know that before.

LEVINE: What did you see of the war in Germany?

FRKOVICH: Bombs coming down on us! And uh, running away whenever [the] alarm comes. I didn't make machine, I just was learning. They just teach me how to make, but ah, I was not at stage that I was saying, well you do this, you do that. Every time they give you something, they got [a] teacher or experienced guy over you [who would] tell you, "You do this like this."

LEVINE: So, you left your apprenticeship when the war was over?

FRKOVICH: When [the] war ended I went back to Yugoslavia, communist Yugoslavia. “Tito-slavia.” [NOTE: Josip Broz Tito was a Communist general who drove the Germans from Yugoslavia and reunited the country. He led Yugoslavia from 1945 until his death in 1980.] And then I saw what was going on. Oh, terrible. Everything was owned by [the] government. You didn't have any control practically of anything. And practically you didn't have nothing. You could not say nothing. Especially if you say I'm Croatian. Then you [were a] goner.

LEVINE: What did you have to say?

FRKOVICH: Just say, “Tito is good.” Just say we got it good. And do what they tell you. Not what you *should* do, but...do as I *tell* you, but don't do what I'm *doing* (he laughs).

LEVINE: So in other words, the Croatians were....

FRKOVICH: We were condemned. We went actually practically occupied by Serbs. Because every position there was of any importance, the Serb was right there. Their police were there. Government was there. Any position that was anything worth it, that's where the Serbs were.

What was Paul doing in Nazi Germany during World War II?

When he returns to his home country, Croatia is again part of Yugoslavia. How does Paul describe life for Croats in the new Yugoslavia?

LEVINE: Okay, so why don't you tell then when did you leave your homeland...

FRKOVICH: That was 1946. May first. I crossed the border of Italy. I came with a train, close to the border and I sneak through the night. When you walk across the field, they had one wire approximately up to the knees. And the other wire was up [higher]. And I hit both wires.

LEVINE: When you hit a wire what happened?

FRKOVICH: I think the bell [would] ring at the station. When the guy came, [he yelled] HALT! I dropped down on the ground. And he goes again HALT! and I still was laying down. Then some time passes by and he goes again HALT! I said [to myself], you don't know where I am... (He laughs)

I ran [over] the wall. After that I didn't hear nothing from anybody. And I was going, I don't know how far, then I find bushes, and that's where I wait for daylight. Then I went to[the] English [military] command in Trieste [Italy], where the refugees usually go, and you get register. And they know I came from the other side and I was going whole darn week for questioning. And ah it got on my nerves. After one week, I say, if you're going to send me back, tell me. I go by myself so I won't go to jail. Or send me away from here.

And then they send me to [a refugee] camp in Bologna [Italy]. Then...[to] Bagnoli. [I stayed there] About eight months. That was another hell too...If [we ate] warm beans or [with] piece of potatoes in it (he laughs), it was good. Mostly [watery] soup, like that. We were hungry there too, but what the heck, what do you expect? It is a camp. Refugee.

LEVINE: And where were the people in the camp coming from?

FRKOVICH: From everywhere. They were ah, Croatian. They were even Jews were there too. Poland, Russian, all over the Europe. They got there same way I did. Risk their life, I mean, to escape. Everybody sticks to their own...This section was Croatian, next building was Ukrainian, or whatever.

LEVINE: What did you learn about human nature being in such a situation?

FRKOVICH: It's survival. Everybody looks [out] for themselves. You just look how to survive.

LEVINE: Okay, so when did you leave there and how come you left when you did?

FRKOVICH: They ask you where would you like to go? First place, I wanted to leave Europe. That was my main object. I didn't care where I landed on continent of America, just that I come here. I was supposed to go to Paraguay but they ask us if we would like to stay in Argentina. Sure! (he laughs) In one week we got papers...and we stay[ed] in Argentina.

How does Paul leave his homeland?

Describe the refugee camp where Paul lives after his escape.

Why does he go to Argentina at first instead of the U.S.?

LEVINE: So what year was that?

FRKOVICH: 1947. I start to work as a machine repair guy. [But] I want[ed] to come to the United State. So I was working there, but in meantime I met this guy that I came to US. One day we came like this, and we come to conversation and he said that he would like to go to US. I said, so would I. How? Well, I went through the [American] Consul [office, but] that is nowhere [meaning, it didn't work]. And then we decided, let's go on a bicycle.

LEVINE: A bicycle? From Argentina?

FRKOVICH: Uh-huh. From Argentina. We started to go through Uruguay. Through Brazil. Go through [the] jungle. Along River Amazon. All way to Colombian border.

LEVINE: Now, did you speak Spanish?

FRKOVICH: Ya, ya. And then we work[ed] in Colombia for about [a] month. They were building [an] airport. We couldn't go any further because there was no going through. It was about five kilometers,

jungle. Plain jungle. No roads, no nothing. And the boss in charge of the airport he told us if we gonna go help them repair the engines, that he will take us over the jungle. And that's what we did. They paid us. We didn't work for nothing. But it was with the agreement with him that he will take us over the jungle with [a] plane. And we fixed three tractors. They were disabled, I mean. And he was very happy, too. Because in those days they didn't have any help, no trained people. So we go through Columbia. Panama. Costa Rica. Nicaragua. Honduras. [El] Salvador. Guatemala. In Guatemala we sold the bicycles because we didn't have visa[s] to go into Mexico. They want[ed] visa[s]. We sneaked into Mexico.

LEVINE: How did you make that border? Any experience trying to get in there?

FRKOVICH: We met some Mexican people. We tell them what we want. (He laughs) And they help us. They smuggle us into country. In Mexico, we went to visit our people again...

LEVINE: Your people? You mean there were Croatians in Mexico?

FRKOVICH: Croatians. Ya. Oh, ya. Croatians were living there and we told them what happened, and they didn't give you million, but they give you something. We in effect, we went, we start from Argentina with \$60. At that time [it] was pretty good money. And we came to...Laredo, Texas with \$55. (laughs).

How does Paul travel from Buenos Aires to Mexico? Why doesn't he immigrate through official channels, such as the American Consulate?

In Mexico, who helps Paul and his friend? Why?

LEVINE: How much later was it, from [when] you left Argentina 'til you arrived in Laredo?

FRKOVICH: Fourteen months. (chuckles). So, you need papers to cross the border. When you go to Mexico, or you go anywhere... You have to have papers. We didn't have those papers. So, near Laredo we went, we waited 'til it gets dark. It was somewhere around two or three o'clock in night. It was March 9, 1950 that we cross at [the] Rio Grande...clothes we had right on top of our head, tied to the head.

LEVINE: And how long were you in water? How long did it take?

FRKOVICH: No more than ten minutes. And when we start to go, the water start to come in my mouth. And I was ready to go and swim. Then I felt under my feet...

LEVINE: That you were going up and out. How did you feel when you reached the United States after all that?

FRKOVICH: Oh, heck, when we got to the other side, [we were] shaking like this. Cold! We put our clothes on, then we start to walk little further. And we find bushes, then we lay down there. In the morning we were coming to Laredo. And we went to a restaurant. And the guy was Mexican. We start[ed] to talk Spanish to him, [but he spoke] English. (laughs)

LEVINE: Oh, you didn't know English then.

FRKOVICH: No. Heck, no. We come to San Antonio by train. Then to St. Louis by bus. And then, his relatives came there, pick him up and I was left alone. That's [the] American way (he laughs). Left alone, and then was from near my town a guy, and he took me in.

LEVINE: He came from near your town in Croatia?

FRKOVICH: Ya. In Croatia. From next to my town, and then he took me in, he gave a place to sleep and eat and that was for just [a] couple days. Then I start to look for a job. Went to church, [a] Croatian church. The priest put me to work in [a] hospital. As an orderly. [It was the] late night [shift, so] it wasn't much of doing anyhow.

LEVINE: Not doing machine work.

FRKOVICH: Well, I couldn't do machine work, because I don't know the language. In South America, everything is centimeters. In [the US we measure with] inches. Convert all that. I didn't have that knowledge, and I couldn't do it. (big sigh) Oh, boy.

I worked in [the] hospital for about three months. There were some Polish people there...going to school during [the] daytime. I would take their books at night when I was working, read 'em and read 'em and read 'em. Boy, did I read 'em. I didn't know what I was reading...

LEVINE: These were books to teach you English?

FRKOVICH: Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya. They were going to school for the language and I used their books at night when they were sleeping. At work I used to write and rewrite, write and rewrite.

LEVINE: So that's why you could study so much.

FRKOVICH: Ya, ya, ya, ya. That's what I did for three months. Then I could not sleep during daytime. I got just like [a] toothpick. I got thin, and lose weight and it was getting to me, kind of dizzy. I quit...there was a line of factories along the river, and I went there [to] look for the job.

LEVINE: Did you speak English now, a little bit?

FRKOVICH: A little bit, ya. (he laughs) Honestly, when you have to do something, you do it.

How do Paul and his friend enter the US?

How does his job as an orderly in a hospital help him?

I [was] fill[ing out] applications [when] I heard the sound of kind of Germanish language (he laughs), and right away I ask him if he speaks German. Oh ya. (laughing) And then he asks me what I do. Where

did I learn and all that. And he tell me, you want to come to work tomorrow? And I said, No. I started Monday. (laughing hard)

[Later, this man's relatives] prepare[d a] dinner for Congressman Sullivan, and he put, I guess, [a] private bill for us to stay in this country. Connections. [The Congressman] came there and his wife also. That's how we got introduced and he put a bill for us. Private bill [for him and]... John Marklin. The guy that came with me. We never broke up in general.

LEVINE: So the person who offered you the job, that started the ball rolling.

FRKOVICH: I just told him that I learned in Germany. He didn't know how did I come into this country. That was mistake too. (He laughs.) But we come to that later. That congressman introduced that bill. But eight to ten months later, he had a heart attack [and died].

Probably ten, fifteen days [after the congressman died], the letter comes. I mean from Immigration the letter comes. [It said] you have to leave the country. So we got [to the Immigration office], and he say, where do you want to go? New Orleans or New York? [For] voluntary deportation? We took New York, and voluntary deportation.

And when we got to New York, I find myself a room to live, and we start together to work in Brooklyn. [They found another congressman] that [agreed to write them] a similar bill... But the guy that got [us the] connection with the [new] congressman, he say, it cost him \$500 each.

LEVINE: He wanted you to pay him for having gotten you that far, to get the bill...

FRKOVICH: Ya, ya. To get the bill. Because he say [getting the bill introduced so he could stay in the US] cost money, so we didn't question that. But we [paid] him and we thought, we don't have to worry about anything. We went to work for a year. But that was [a] mistake. We should have report[ed] to the Immigration. The Immigration [man told them], you're supposed to report yourself, but you didn't. And he took us right here to Ellis Island. (He laughs.)

And that's where I was three months and twenty days. I was here waiting to be deported. They didn't know where [he should be deported] because Yugoslavia was Communist. [He could not] be deported to Argentina. [He had never been an Argentine citizen and had been away too long.] But the [wife] of the same congressman in St. Louis [Sullivan], she became a congresswoman. I guess in St. Louis, the connections they were working over there, and tell her about us. And she introduced a bill for us which came through and we got the green card.

e how Paul gained legal status in the US. What problems did he face?

Why does he have to go to Ellis Island and face deportation? Why isn't he sent back home?

LEVINE: Describe Ellis Island when you were here. What was it like here?

FRKOVICH: Well, ah, it was not bad really. We had a meal three times a day. I used to read most of [the] day all the time that I was there. In English. There was a library here. We [would] say, if [life] in former Yugoslavia was like Ellis Island, I think everybody would come to Ellis Island. (He laughs) We look[ed] at New York through our windows. And it was [a] clean bed. [People were there from] every nation in the world. Illegally, illegally here. They were all [there] for deportation. I didn't get that green card right away. [Even after his release] I had to report every month to the Island. I used to carry [a] hacksaw in case they won't let me go. I was planning to escape. I was not planning to be deported, no matter what. I was ready to run.

LEVINE: Yeah. So you reported for how many months after that?

FRKOVICH: For [a] couple [of] months, and then the bill [was passed by Congress] and they gave us [each a] green card [which let him work in the US]. A month later, I went to California. I find a job [with] Westinghouse. I [have] been there for 30 years.

LEVINE: So do you think of yourself as American at all?

FRKOVICH: Ya. I'm a naturalized American and I like America. I think is best country than any country in the world. But yet, we make mistakes. I vote... But what I think, what I say or do, doesn't mean much anyhow. The higher people in government, they make those [decisions].

LEVINE: You could be bitter about some of the things that you've experienced.

FRKOVICH: Why? Why? It's over. When I came to this country, I learn, don't cry over spilled milk (he laughs). I'm not money hungry, and what the heck? My life is okay. I'm not rich, but I still have [enough] that I can live. If you have a point where you want to go, you can get there. Maybe a little hardship. Everything that you want to become is a hardship, but you can get to the point where you want to be. There is no other country [where] you can do that.

How does Paul describe his time at Ellis Island? How did he plan to break out?

Paul seems to have mixed feelings about being an American. Describe how he feels as a citizen. Does he feel citizens can change government decisions? Why or why not?

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **PAUL FRKOVICH**

FROM:

YEAR he came to the US: _____

AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did he choose to leave home and come to America?

BECAUSE:

